

Moses' death – Sermon (Deuteronomy 34)
Sunday 25th October 2020
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I visited Ian French-Wright this week and discovered that Ian celebrated his 92nd birthday earlier this month. In that context, I told him that I would be preaching this week about Moses, who lived to the age of 120. Ian said, “120 *what?!?*” – a good question! – and we had a good chuckle together about that. I asked if I could quote him, because I thought that you would enjoy hearing what he had to say.

Whether or not years were measured in the same way as ours in about the 13th century BC, according to ancient reckoning 120 years was symbolically considered to be a full lifespan. We are told that in Genesis 6:3, though I, for one, am more familiar with the suggestion of life-expectancy made in some verses from Psalm 90: “Seventy years is all we have – eighty years, if we are strong.” Or, in the memorable language of the King James Bible:

“The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.”

We will come back to that thought, and the link between today's psalm and the last chapter of Deuteronomy, later on.

Let's look first at our reading from Deuteronomy and the account of Moses' death. As we know from our recent lectionary readings and from Hamish's sermons over the last few weeks, Moses is a towering figure in Judaism and Christianity. He was a great and honoured leader of the people of God. The book of Deuteronomy concludes with this extraordinary epitaph:

“There has never been a prophet in Israel like Moses: the Lord spoke with him face to face. No other prophet has ever done miracles and wonders like those that Lord sent Moses to perform against the King of Egypt, his officials and the entire country. No other prophet has been able to do the great and terrifying things that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.”

However ... today's reading has a poignant tone, doesn't it, because, despite the uniquely close relationship God had with Moses, and Moses' good health at the end of his long life, Moses did not get to enter the Promised Land. The writer of the book of Hebrews includes Moses among those who “died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance [he] saw and greeted them” (Hebrews 11:13). Moses knew his successor, Joshua, and helped prepare him for his role as the leader of God's people, something that Hamish will be talking about in a few weeks' time, I believe.

Because I'd like to focus on some of the *lessons* we might draw from Moses' inability to finish or accomplish all that he might have dreamed of doing or achieving, I don't want to dwell too much on the possible *whys and wherefores* of his not entering the Promised Land, but I will mention two ideas about that in passing, in case the apparent injustice of that situation troubles you.

First, in Deuteronomy 32, God says that Moses will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land because he disobeyed God at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:1-13). You probably remember that story, where instead of speaking to the rock and commanding water to come from it, as God had instructed, Moses strikes the rock and says to the people, "Listen, you rebels! Do we have to get water out of this rock for you?" perhaps thereby claiming to be the source of the miracle, rather than giving credit to God (Numbers 20:10).

A second suggestion is that Moses can be seen as a sort of suffering servant, punished with, and for, the sin of the people. In Deuteronomy 1:37 God is angry with the Israelites for their lack of trust, and Moses is included in the punishment. In that verse Moses says to the people, "Because of you the Lord also became angry with me and said, 'Not even you, Moses, will enter the land.'"

It is a bit ambiguous, then, why Moses is not permitted entry into the Promised Land. In the chapter of Deuteronomy we have read today, no reason at all is given. He just doesn't get to do it. And perhaps this speaks more powerfully to our own experience than if he did, or even if we fully understood why he didn't. Because it is part of human experience that we will not accomplish all that we might dream of or strive to do.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (Former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth) in reflecting on the question - What do we learn from the life, and death, of Moses? – writes:

For each of us, even for the greatest, there is a Jordan we will not cross, a promised land we will not enter, a destination we will not reach. That is what Rabbi Tarfon meant when he said: It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it. What we began, others will continue. What matters is that we undertook the journey. We did not stand still.

The gradual process of learning that there are limits to what we can achieve, and there are things we will leave undone, is a process of relinquishment which can be sobering, but can also be liberating. Let me illustrate that from the research I completed about midlife spirituality (through Otago University):

Thomas (Catholic priest, 54) told me that "perspective" is a word that is important to him. Deepening awareness of the diminishing amount of time he has left to accomplish goals, and review and revision of those goals, have been significant components of Thomas's midlife journey:

The way that I experience it [midlife] most at the moment is, you know, when you're young you always think, "I'll do that one day. I'll do that one day." And in the last few years I've found that I won't do it. I haven't got time. ... I'm just running out of time.

Both of Thomas's parents died in their early seventies, and he is aware that if he lives to the age his mother was at her death, he has only fifteen years more left to live. He said, "That's one of the sobering realities of midlife." He continued:

As an ordained minister, and a person of faith, I cannot imagine the thought that I've only got fifteen years left, possibly, without faith. ... I think one of the things that faith does, for me, probably the most important thing, is that it means that ... it's not up to me to do everything within the years I've got walking on earth, because, firstly, as a Christian it's not just about me (there's a whole team of people working on this), and the second thing is, it's not about achieving. And I think in my early years it was.

There is a sense of freedom expressed in that, isn't there? I have thought about Thomas's words a lot, and what I perceive to be the development in wisdom he described as he has learned to accept his limits and to relinquish control, handing the results of his efforts over to God. There's a humility in that which I find inspiring, actually.

In Thomas's words (and in Moses' example, too) we have a glimpse, I think, of a "bigger picture" – a reminder that all of us who call ourselves Christians are part of a story that is not yet finished.

Martin Luther King "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech given on April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. On the following day, King was assassinated.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

Today's readings from Deuteronomy and Psalm 90 (which you might have noted in the bulletin is attributed to Moses) speak to us of the need to fulfil our part in faithfully serving God throughout our lives, while recognising that God is ultimately in control. We are called to "bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures" – as Jesus says to his disciples in John 15 – there is so much that we *can* do in this needy world – but there is grace and freedom in recognising that the results don't all depend on us. And so, let us continue to ask God, in the words of Psalm 90:12 -

**Teach us how short our life is,
so that we may become wise.**

During the church service, we went on to read an Affirmation of Faith together. (See below.)

People reading this sermon on-line might also like to reflect on some of the words from the following prayer. This prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, drafted for a

homily by Cardinal John Dearden in Nov. 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. The words of this prayer have been attributed to the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him.

A FUTURE NOT OUR OWN

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime
only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise
that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the Kingdom always lies beyond us ...

That is what we are about.
We plant a seed that will one day grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations
that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation
in realising that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete,
but it is a beginning,
a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace
to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Affirmation of Faith: We are a pilgrim people

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We proclaim Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One,
confessing him as Lord
to the glory of God the Father.

In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
We acclaim Jesus as the Lord of the church,

the Head over all things,
the beginning of a new creation.

We acknowledge that we live and work
between the time of Christ's death and resurrection
and the final consummation of all things
which he will bring.

We are a pilgrim people,
always on the way towards the promised goal;
on the way, Christ feeds us with word and sacrament,
and we have the gift of the Spirit
in order that we may not lose the way.

We will live and work within the faith and unity
of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church,
bearing witness to that unity
which is both Christ's gift and his will.

We affirm that every member of the church
is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified.

Together with all the people of God,
we will serve the world for which Christ died,
and we await with hope the day of the Lord Jesus.

~ adapted from the *Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*. Posted on David Beswick's **Worship and Preaching** website. <http://www.beswick.info/>